

Keynote Speech by Ambassador (ret.) Michael Guest
Conference on “Towards an International Rainbow Coalition:
Road Map to Global LGBT Human Rights”
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Thank you for that welcome, and indeed for inviting me to take part in this conference. It's always wonderful to be among friends, and I very much feel that way with the marvelous people I've met here today.

It's of course a pleasure to be back in the Netherlands, a country with such a proud tradition of leadership in Europe and in the world. We're grateful for the hospitality that the city of Den Haag has provided us, and for the privilege of meeting in this beautiful and historic hall. And we deeply appreciate both this country's strong record of leadership on LGBT rights, and the ground-breaking work of HIVOS in strengthening LGBT rights around the world. The Netherlands can be proud of its efforts to make the world a fairer and better place.

I've been asked to offer a few closing thoughts about what to expect from the Obama Administration on the issues we've discussed. I must begin with this disclaimer: though I worked on Obama's presidential campaign, and then on his transition team, I do not work for him now. And so while I support this President and believe he is the right leader for my country in today's world, I can't claim to know what President Obama thinks or what actions he might take. So with that very important caveat, I'll gladly offer you my perspective on how the new U.S. Administration might help with the struggles we've discussed today.

America and Obama's Election

Many of you know the United States, or have friends who live there, and so may have witnessed my country's struggle with LGBT issues over time. As in many of your countries, religious and social conservatives in the United States have sharply opposed equal civil rights for those of us who are gay. For more than four decades, they've had the loudest voice in this debate. In politics, the Republican Party has empowered them, effectively blocking LGBT civil rights legislation at the national level. But it's also fair to say that America's progressive political leaders – largely from the Democratic Party – have lacked the political courage to tackle, in a principled manner, laws that are distinctly unfair to gay Americans or, for that matter, the broader obsession that so many Americans have with gay-related public policy issues.

It was a genuine surprise to me when a relatively obscure candidate named Barack Obama appeared in our presidential campaign. I was taken by how refreshingly direct he was in calling for an end to the divisions between gay and straight Americans. And with the important exception of his opposition to gay marriage, his positions on LGBT policy issues were consonant with my own. Of particular note to this conference, he said that

international LGBT human rights must be “...part and parcel of any conversations we have about human rights.”

I supported President Obama’s candidacy for these and many other non-LGBT policy reasons. But I also was convinced that the filter of Obama’s personal experience as a constitutional scholar and, indeed, as an African-American had helped him understand the inequalities that LGBT Americans face, and would propel his commitment to the equality goals of our community.

In saying this, I don’t mean to suggest that perfect parallels exist between the struggles of African-Americans, on one hand, and LGBT Americans, on the other. The histories, indeed, are not the same. I also know that experience doesn’t always translate into empathy. That lesson was taught to me by former Secretary of State Condi Rice, who often spoke of the discrimination she witnessed as a child, yet would not amend State Department regulations that discriminate against lesbian and gay employees, causing me to end my career. But on the campaign trail, candidate Obama was different. His campaign speech on race showed him to be an inquisitive thinker and learner. I’m convinced that, unlike Condi Rice, he would find it morally indefensible to raise the drawbridge of equality behind him.

Foreign Policy

In foreign policy, President Obama’s first five months in office have confirmed these convictions. In March, the Administration joined 66 other countries that have called for homosexuality to be decriminalized worldwide – an initiative led by our host country, of course, and by France. But the bigger event may have been last month’s follow-on conference in Paris, to which the State Department sent a representative, even though the Administration remains very much understaffed. I was proud when I saw his affirmation that “...we must uphold and protect the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, as part of our commitment to upholding the universality of human rights.” I’m sure none of you can imagine a Bush Administration representative speaking so clearly to the human rights problems that impact our community, and relating that to principles that the American people broadly support. It’s also worth noting that, for the first time in eight years, the Administration celebrated LGBT Pride, this very month, by issuing statements. In her statement, Secretary Clinton pledged directly that “...as Secretary of State, I will advance a comprehensive human rights agenda that includes the elimination of violence and discrimination against people based on sexual orientation or gender identity.”

These signals are important to me. For more than half of my life, I represented a country that regularly calls for civil liberties and human rights to be respected abroad. But if we as a nation are true to that call, we must be consistent in its application. And if we aren’t willing to help LGBT individuals in their quest for fundamental rights that we, as a nation, hold to be self-evident, then our country’s claim to represent civil liberties and human rights simply will not ring true.

I'm proud that the Council for Global Equality, an organization in which I'm involved, has had a direct hand in pushing for the steps I've mentioned. The Council brings together a dozen respected human rights and LGBT advocacy groups. You can find out more about us at www.GlobalEquality.org. Briefly, we're pressing for the United States to stand forcefully for LGBT equality goals, at home and abroad, as a matter of principle. And while one might argue that the Administration's steps thus far are symbolic in many ways, the Council is pushing to ensure they lead to real and concrete results.

We're doing this in lots of ways. For example, we're urging the State Department to instruct our embassies to explain why homosexual relations and relationships should be decriminalized, and to urge that other countries join in that commitment. We've asked the State Department to designate personnel that will monitor human rights abuses against LGBT individuals abroad, much as it does human trafficking and religious freedom and women's issues. And we've asked that human rights officers be trained on LGBT-related terms and issues, to help guide their advocacy and reporting.

Only ten days ago, the U.S. House of Representatives, our lower chamber of parliament, embraced these goals in legislation that will now go to the U.S. Senate for agreement. And beyond these goals, we're having a very positive dialogue with the Department on issues ranging from the extrajudicial killings of Iraqi LGBT individuals, to how PEPFAR funds should be more inclusive of LGBT concerns – and exclusive of groups that, in using those funds, promote discrimination and intolerance. And so in foreign policy, I think it's fair to say that fundamentalist values are being replaced by the fundamental principles at the heart of my country's founding – equality, fairness, and respect for diversity.

The Domestic Agenda

But America's commitment to LGBT equality must be confirmed at home if it's to be anchored abroad. Regrettably, progress in this area is harder to see. We have a long way to go before America's LGBT citizens realize the full civil rights to which, by birthright, they are equally entitled.

On Wednesday, as I boarded a plane to come to Europe, the President did move to erase the inequalities that caused my departure from the State Department. For that, I am deeply and personally grateful. He also called on other cabinet agencies to eliminate disparities that can be tackled without violating the Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA, which defines marriage as being between man and woman. And he called on Congress to repeal that law. But that leaves a wide range of important promises to the LGBT community unfulfilled. These include employment protections, fully equal workplace benefits, the ability to serve our country openly and equally, and of course marriage and the rights that it conveys.

The LGBT community is anxious to see greater progress, and some among us are understandably angry that so little has materialized. I will never defend inaction on anyone's part on matters related to assuring the fundamental rights of any citizen. But some of this anger is partly misdirected. President Obama has far greater leeway in foreign

policy than in domestic policy, where Congressional action is almost always required. Frankly, I want to see more leadership by Congressional allies who are eager for our political donations and make lots of promises to get them, but then fail to stand on principle and fight for what's right. That said, I do believe the President can and must do more.

First, Obama really must distance himself from Bush Administration policies that have been so injurious to LGBT America. Last week the Justice Department defended the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy that prohibits openly gay Americans from serving in their country's military. In doing so, it used arguments that the President rejected when he sought the votes of the LGBT community. And only days ago, the Justice Department vigorously defended DOMA by comparing same-sex marriage to incest and pedophilia. I find that outrageous, insulting and deeply offensive.

I really don't believe the Justice Department's positions represent the President's personal views, and of course we all know that the President is required to support the existing law of the land. But we should expect him to distance himself clearly and publicly from the shameful arguments used by Justice. This isn't just a matter of being true to us: rather, it should be seen by him as a matter of personal integrity, given the convictions he expressed while seeking our support.

Second, we should expect President Obama to press leaders in both houses of Congress to make DOMA's repeal a high priority. We should expect him to do the same on other pending legislation that I've mentioned. And we should expect him to invest his own time in pressing for the votes needed to accomplish these tasks. You see, unless Obama not only stands forcefully against these discriminatory policies, but also undertakes vigorously to change them, he inherits those policies as his own. And in those circumstances, I can safely predict that a number of gay Americans, myself included, will either sit out the next election or invest our money and energy, starting about a year from now, in seeking candidates at every level who will bring the change we need.

Finally, we need President Obama to speak to the American people about why full and equal civil rights protections for LGBT citizens matter. A comprehensive speech of that sort has never been given by any president, and so it would make history. More important, it would do two things. First, it would help propel action on Capitol Hill, which remains, after all, where so many of our fundamental rights remain stalled. And second, I have no doubt that this president, with his extraordinary communication skills, could move the people of America to a better understanding of, and more reasoned approach toward, the concerns of LGBT Americans. I'm hopeful we'll see such a speech before long.

Some of my friends, in and out of the Administration, plead for patience. Well, the truth is that LGBT Americans have been enormously patient over the 40 years since the Stonewall uprising, which began our quest for equal civil rights. We've been patient, too, while the President and Congress have dealt with the economy and two wars. We too are Americans, after all, and these issues affect us as much as they do anyone else. And for too long we've patiently given our time and money to candidates who've let us down. But surely it's not too

much to ask that our elected leaders stand publicly on the side of the Constitution, and act accordingly. That is all we ask, in fact – and for me, it's not a negotiable request.

What troubles me is that too many politicians in my country still seem to see homosexuality as an issue of politics, not one of principle. That's certainly the case in Congress, and perhaps even in an Administration that sees itself as standing for change. The simple truth is that American attitudes are changing. A recent Gallup poll showed that 69% of Americans now favor allowing gays to serve openly in the military. And despite California's vote against gay marriage, polls fairly consistently show that growing numbers of Americans are comfortable with the concept.

While Washington has been silent, grassroots demands for equality are growing. You've heard reference to my being a co-author of the Dallas Principles – an effort by some of us to frame our quest for full civil rights in ways that most Americans can understand. Thousands of people are signing onto those principles. If you're not familiar with this effort, I'd encourage you to log onto TheDallasPrinciples.org. There's also been a call for an LGBT civil rights march on Washington, to take place this fall. I'm actually heartened that people are coming to the recognition that if we care about this issue, we have to get involved. This is one of the things I love so much about my country. I really believe that those who ignore our country's founding values, whether in Washington or in towns across the United States, are going to wake up to energized opponents when elections come around in 2010 and 2012.

Accountability for Change

Now, I've talked at length about the domestic context of LGBT rights for one clear reason: without greater LGBT equality at home, there will be limits to what the United States can and will do abroad. But the lesson I really want you to draw is this. So many people in this hall clearly have placed great hope in President Obama, and frankly I do as well. But rather than waiting for him – or for that matter, any other national leader – to take action, you and I must have a sense of urgency in creating the momentum, attitudes and openings needed to empower change.

In my former life as a diplomat, I spoke frequently about the importance of civil society, and its power to force change. Well, now I'm part of civil society. And I believe we have within us and among us the power to make a real difference – not just for ourselves, but for millions of others around the globe.

There's so much energy in this great hall, so much commitment to the equality that has eluded us. Surely we can direct that energy toward the result we seek. In foreign policy terms, when LGBT people are abused or discriminated against, we should press our governments to respond. We should demand that our countries' foreign assistance target the needs of struggling LGBT groups – in the same manner that it's directed to strengthen other vulnerable parts of society. We should urge foreign ministries to confer on how funding and projects can complement each other, so that our efforts have the synergy they

need. And we should seek refugee protections for LGBT people who, out of well-founded fear of persecution, are compelled to leave their countries. It's the only right thing for us to do.

But we also have our work to do at home, in each of the countries represented here. We need to encourage progressive voices to stand with us. We need to find better ways of engaging with the donor community, many of whom know little about the LGBT movement and its needs. We all have a stake in ensuring that our national immigration laws recognize that our family members, too, deserve immigration rights. And in this interconnected world, with the power of the internet and facebook and twitter and what-have-you, it's critical that we draw on each other's strengths, experiences, and ideas to integrate our efforts at equality.

You see, during the presidential campaign, President Obama challenged those of us who supported his candidacy to hold him accountable for the changes to which he had committed. I've done so today and will continue to do so, until the promises made to our community are realized. But we also must hold ourselves accountable. We owe it to ourselves, and indeed to each other, to use our personal influence to create the conditions in which real and lasting change can be anchored. This is the civil rights challenge of our time. It belongs to each of us – and to our parents, our colleagues, our neighbors and our friends. I believe that those who follow will judge us according to whether we've stepped up to this task.

We are here because we care, and because we are committed. I am so very proud to be among you, and I know in my heart that if we work at this together, we will succeed. In that quest you have my gratitude, my partnership, and my heart. Thank you.